

An Interview with Jim Carroll



**by Frank Andrick
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Jim Carroll is an enigma, and probably has always been so. At night, as a kid, he was a New York street punk sniffing glue and beginning his heroin habit. By day, he was college material on a basketball scholarship to Trinity High; winner of the Random House Young Writers Award at nineteen for excerpts from THE BASKETBALL DIARIES, published in The Paris Review (written between the ages of twelve and sixteen), and all-round hustler.

THE BASKETBALL DIARIES was called by Jamie James "Catcher In The Rye for real, for bigger stakes...it seemed to be the charming but trivial work of a precociously gifted young writer. The catch was that anyone who had read Jimmy Carroll's poetry...knew it was charming but trivial like Moby Dick is charming but trivial." After THE BASKETBALL DIARIES, during the seventies, Carroll worked odd jobs for

Andy Warhol's factory. His book FORCED ENTRIES describes the Max's Kansas City "very hip downtown art scene" and Carroll's experiences with the wildly famous (Dylan, Burroughs, et al).

The last section of the book covers his move to Bolinas, California, where he kicked his heroin habit. In an interview with Barbara Graustark, he said, "Susan Sontag once told me that a junkie has a unique chance to rise up and start life over. But I want kids to know it's not hip to indulge yourself at the bottom unless you're planning one helluva resurrection."

Carroll met Rosemary Klemfuss in California. They were married in 1978. She was a law student at Stanford, and a disc jockey on the college station. She took him to see the punk new wave bands. His old lover Patti Smith also encouraged him--and he read his poetry with her band in San Diego one night, when a dispute grounded her opening act. "When I did the show with Patti, I saw that it could be done. It was incredible fun, and it was so intense and scary and beautiful at the same time."

He later wrote, "Henry Miller's study of Rimbaud, which is really a study of Henry Miller, was the big factor for me going into rock--that was it. That whole thing about getting a heart quality out of work rather than just the intellectual quality. A good poet works on both."

Miller spoke about the inner register and how a great poet has to affect virtual illiterates as well as affecting people through the intellect, and I figured many poets are just writing for other poets today. It's all intellectual concrete minimal poetry."

Besides the Diaries and Forced Entries, it's a sequel, Carroll is the author of LIVING AT THE MOVIES, a collection of poetry, and THE BOOK OF NODS, "prose poems which combine elements of fiction, autobiography and surrealism. His rock albums include CATHOLIC BOY, DRY DREAMS, and I WRITE YOUR NAME. He is Currently working on his first novel, and touring for his latest LP PRAYING MANTiS, a part live/part studio spoken word album for Warner Brothers affiliate Giant Records, which includes new prose and poetry as well as "club favorites" from the books.

Frank Andrick: PRAYING MANTIS is a departure for you.

What compelled you to go from doing poetry and rock and roll on records to putting out a record of spoken word?

Jim Carroll: From the time I put out my last record, I WRITE YOUR NAME, I wanted to take a break from recording and start publishing books again. I made a deal with Viking/Penguin for them to reissue THE BASKETBALL DIARIES and put out some new books; I did a three book deal with the DIARIES, FORCED ENTRIES and THE BOOK OF NODS. At the same time I've been working on two novels which came to me at once. I felt fortunate in that, because in the past my prose has been largely biographical. I've never developed a sustain plot to last through a novel. The two ideas are very different from each other. I just laid it all out in notebooks. I told one of the ideas to my agent, who dug it a lot. It's about these two priests, and it involves a miracle. One of the two priests investigates miracles for the Vatican. The other priest reveals his stigmata at the mission in San Rafael, close to San Francisco. There's also a murder mystery that runs through it. So that's the straight novel that both my agent and my editor at Viking got excited about at lunch. They both wanted chapters and an outline. I spoke with them for over two hours about that book, and then I tried to lay on them the bit about the second book because that's the one I want to write first. They were already excited about the priest book because they saw it as a real money maker. The second book is the one I'm working on now. There's an excerpt from it on PRAYING MANTIS. It's a small fragmented novel about a painter from New York. He feels he has to put aside painting for awhile, that he has to find some spiritual aspect to put into his work because he feels that's missing from it and (from) the works of his peers. Then he goes to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He goes to this Velasquez show and sees this spiritual arrogance and other spiritual qualities that just aren't there in his own work and that of his contemporaries. He's blown away by it. He's freaked. He can't even make it through the show. He runs out into the street and after that (it) becomes like a Grail quest thing. Every chapter is its own short story; it's very fragmented. It was an easier transition for me to work that way than to deal with the structure, the

architecture of the novel. From an audience standpoint, which doesn't mean all that much to me, it's not that far out in left field. It does take place in New York; it deals with the art scene. It's not rock and roll, but...so what?

FA: So you've tried to keep the rock and roll persona separate from your work as a poet, monologist, novelist?

JC: To me it's a separate thing. I probably wouldn't have become involved with rock and roll if it hadn't have been for my friend Earl McGrath, who at the time was the president of Rolling Stone Records. He was the one who played this \$100 demo tape I had made to Keith Richards of the Stones. Earl understood things in literary terms, and obviously most people in the record business didn't. I mean it is a business, and I didn't mind being oblivious to all that shit!

(The work is) totally different from my perspective, but they do overlap to some degree. I've written some songs recently for the Blue Oyster Cult and also for Boz Scaggs. I've found myself saving some songs, so I guess subliminally I want to do a music record sometime. They were the songs I heard music to immediately as I came up with the words.

FA: What parallels do you see between yourself and Marianne Faithfull? You're both, if you will, refugees from the 'Rolling Stones School'. Your lives now entwine around music, poetry and spoken word.

JC: I did this reading with Marianne Faithfull at the Bottom Line. Six shows with the two of us. She had been hanging around the Naropa Institute. She was involved with this big Beatnik-type reunion there. They had this huge reading in Kansas, which I was involved with, too. It was the first time we'd seen each other in years, since we'd worked together on the sound track of the film, TUFF TURF. We get along well, so we talked about doing shows. She was at Naropa teaching a songwriting thing, she was with people like Burroughs whom she liked but didn't really know. And I knew all these people, I got real tight with Burroughs and Anne Waldman, Dennis Berge, and the rest of the people at Naropa--I was supposed to do these shows at the Bottom Line. and I thought, "I'll do them with Marianne Faithfull"--Yeah. That would be great!" I really had a good time doing those shows. One of the guys from Giant records came up to me at the show and said, "Fuck doing a rock and roll record

album, let's do a spoken word record!" because he dug it so much. Then I got this call from Island Records, which is Marianne's record label. They wanted to do an album in that series they do with people like Burroughs and Ginsberg. When I talked to them, they wanted to get some name musicians behind it and they started talking about producers and shit. I thought that if I was going to go through all that, I might as well do a rock and roll album. So I begged off. Some day I'd like to record and put out a number of nights doing shows with Marianne. It was really great.

FA: How did the deal with Giant Records come about for a spoken word rather than rock and roll?

JC: I met with the New York A&R guy for Giant Records, who is a friend of Lenny Kaye, the guitarist from my band, and the Patti Smith group. He's probably best known as the producer of Suzanne Vega's albums. He spoke to my ex wife, Rosemary, who is also my lawyer. His father owns the company that Wilson Phillips record for. He was the archetypal Jim Carroll fan that loved THE BASKETBALL DIARIES and the CATHOLIC BOY album--a rich kid from Long Island. He wanted to do a rock and roll album and I said, "How about a spoken word album?" So I had a dialogue going with them on that. Then Rosemary said, "Why don't you deal with this guy on the West Coast, from Giant? He really digs your stuff.["] I said, "Spoken word record?" He said, "Yeah, do you want to do it in live or in the studio?" I said, "Well, why don't we do a little of both?" So the new CD/cassette was recorded in a studio in Los Angeles and mostly at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery, New York City. (Home of the St. Mark's Poetry Project.)

FA: What's the difference between performing rock and roll and doing spoken word?

JC: I feel that you don't need to have music to rock and roll. I mean, PRAYING MANTIS, it's not like it's a dry poetry album. Inside the booklet that comes with the CD there's a little poem; it's not very good, but it says: "Do you need music to rock and roll?/Just find the back seat in your heart;/Turn up the volume all the way/Until you are facing me/eye to eye." I like the idea of just doing it. It's perverse because I know it's like a test for me to see if there really are people left out

there who will and can listen. Most people have forgotten how to read books. So I made a confession, and I'm putting it on tape. On a record. To see if there are people who will buy spoken word without a back beat that's discernible. Usually at readings I do prose pieces first and then counterpoint. At clubs or colleges, where kids are not used to poetry readings, I usually read the more accessible, funnier prose pieces, from BASKETBALL DIARIES or FORCED ENTRIES, like the ones I chose for this new release--some very short pieces and some longer ones that are really like story-telling...

FA: Tell me about the poets that have been important to you, the ones that you drew from and hung with. People like Frank O' Hara, (who besides being a renowned poet was also a curator at the New York Museum of Modern Art) who--much like yourself--lived in many worlds.

JC: I read the Don Allen anthology, THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY (published in 1960). It came to be the alternative to the anthologies of the more academic poets of the postwar period. I bought it because I saw a poem of his, of Frank O' Hara's, on a friend of mine's wall. Some kid I knew in school. You see, I thought at the time that poetry was sissy stuff--as any kid growing up in a rough New York neighbourhood would. We had that kind of take on poetry. To me (poetry) was a Bob Dylan song, 'cause I was just getting into Bob Dylan at that time. You know, Phil Ochs and people like that. In my own work, I was a lot more affected by Frank and by John Ashbery, by the New York School that they were a part of. I liked Allen Ginsberg out of the Beatnik school, of course. But he and the Beats were not so influential, they didn't make me want to write poems like that. I was so completely taken with Frank! He would take walks from MOMA (the New York Museum of Modern Art) and check stuff out and then go into typewriter shops and type it, trying it out on the new Olivettis (O'Hara is famous for his LUNCH POEMS.)

I even followed him home from work one time. He died in his sleep that summer. It was that (following) winter that I became involved with the poetry scene. I didn't realize til then the enormous influence Frank had on all these young poets. I thought that I had discovered Frank was going to

mould my style (on his) That's how much I was influenced. Then I started going to these poetry readings, only to find out that everybody on the Lower East Side had been influenced by Frank They were ALL reading poems very much like his. It was kinda depressing, in a way. From what I knew of Frank, and having read LUNCH POEMS, I knew his work came from some kind of immediacy--from just walking around. Of course I found out later that Frank had not written a poem in quite a while, at the time he died. He took on more and more responsibility at the museum. He started off in a small position, like a docent or something, but when he graduated, or I mean died--well, I guess that's a kind of graduation--he was putting on just about everything that was getting shown there. A lot of people put the blame for his decline in a poetic sense on that. I think his last show was the (Jackson) Pollock show, the big one that everyone still remembers. I have spoken to a lot of people who knew him who claim that (that's why his poetry work tapered off). When I found that out it was really depressing to me. I thought, "Is this what happens after a while?" Everything in those days inspired me! It just didn't seem right that these curator obligations should take over from his own (real) work. He was so close to all the painters and poets that were on the scene. They all thought he was a genius; they couldn't understand why he wasn't writing or why he was so enamored by them when they felt they were the ones really enamored by Frank and by his work.

FA: Now we're talking about the places where poetry and the visual arts cross. What about your own involvement with that?

JC: In New York there were galleries. I came along after the big boom of them on Tenth Street, This was in the late fifties and sixties. Then the whole thing seemed to open up again in the late seventies and early eighties. There were a lot of artists with big spaces. big lofts, and they would have people reading in their lofts. They could display their stuff--paintings, sculptures, assemblages, whatever--and entertain, too. There were a lot of poets and painters, other artists doing collaborations. A lot of people I knew and hung out with got by through writing or working for ART NEWS; at the time, John Ashbery was one of their main editors. Some

of those Madison Avenue galleries would pay you to review their shows so they could get more press. So everybody supplemented their incomes by doing reviews in Art News and other papers. It was a time of a poetry renaissance. There were a lot of hassles between the Black Mountain Poets, the New York School, and the second generation poets. The squabbling was mostly over National Endowment for the Arts grants. That inter-faction thing probably goes on even more today because of the sparcity of N. E. A. grants under the current administration.

FA: How did all of that lead to the publication of THE BASKETBALL DIARIES? I know you wrote them while you were thirteen and fourteen years old, but they got published a few years later.

JC: It's like that piece on the record TINY TORTURES. There were all kinds of readings going on, organised events, performance things, challenges for poets to do what they normally would not do. I would never have published THE BASKETBALL DIARIES if THE WORLD magazine--published out of St. Marks Church--if they hadn't had one issue that was going to be all prose. I didn't have anything, so I just showed them all these diaries, I didn't know what their take on them would be.

At first I wondered if I should expose THE BASKETBALL DIARIES, but I was stuck with no material, so I didn't think about it too much.

Everybody thought they were great after they were out in THE WORLD. Then the people from The Paris Review read them and dug them, so I published excerpts from them in The Paris Review. After that I got a lot of book offers. I just sort of hedged them off for a while, until I got an agent. Anne Waldman, the famous poet, had to type up THE BASKETBALL DIARIES manuscript for me. I was just much more interested in doing a book of poems first. I wasn't interested in doing the DIARIES...it seemed so retrospect from where I was at. Everyone on the scene dug them. They found it all incredible, really camp. A lot of people thought that either the DIARIES were made up and I was a total genius or that if they were real, then I was a complete life genius. You see, 'genius' was a big word back then. To me it was just another kid trying. I knew it was a book, but to me

it really wasn't literature, they were stories strung together, The Paris Review crowd thought they were totally camp. My role (in all this) was that I wanted to get away from this street kid kind of life I was leading. The reason I wasn't so crazy about wanting to become a beatnik poet was that it was too natural to me. I was so used to that street scene. It seemed kinda corny to me to see people trying to get in on it. THE BASKETBALL DIARIES had been written in that (street speech) style. I wanted to find and to write poetry. I wanted something that could take me completely out of my life! Out of my everyday life. That's why I found poets like Frank O' Hara and John Ashbery, poets who were much more abstract, and erudite, and in a certain way more interesting to me. I finally published the Diaries in their entirety with Bantam after I moved out to California. It wasn't a hippy book in and about the Sixties, it seemed there was a much better audience when the punk scene came along. It was like everything had come around again, 180 degrees.

FA: Let's move now into the seventies and eighties with the C. B. G. B's, Patti Smith, Tom Verlaine, The Ramones etc.

JC: I was in California for most of that, in Bolinas, during my recluse period. I kept reading about it in The Village Voice. It kind of amazed me that suddenly Patti was big. There were unbelievable sums of money being tossed around. Patti and I were friends much earlier in New York, from about 1969. I remember Tom Verlaine and Richard Myers--who later renamed himself Richard Hell-- when they first came to New York City from Delaware. Richard Hell at the time was this little fat guy. They were hanging out on the poetry scene. They were aspiring young poets; I mean, I didn't even know that Tom Verlaine played guitar. When we did talk it was about poetry and art, writing and stuff. But as far as being around in the old C. B G. B's scene, I was happy being in this recluse period in Bolinas. I was so resolved to it that I felt fine about it. Of course, I knew I was missing out on something. It was exciting because for the first time people my age were doing something. Before that everyone had been much older than me. The poets and painters I had hung with were at least ten years older. I was really fortunate to have that, but at last young people were doing things.

Actually. Patti had a band in New York when I was still back there. She opened for Phil Ochs at Max's Kansas City [in 1973]. That was just two days before I left for California; Lenny Kaye was with her. She sounded pretty good, too. She had all these ballads. I don't think that anything that she was doing then wound up on any of her albums. It was nice; it was very weird. It wasn't so incongruous (Patti being on that program), really. Of course the audience was (there for) Phil Ochs. I thought. "They're not gonna like what Patti does."

But Patti rose to the occasion. I could see that this was the right genre for Patti as far as words were concerned: her poems had always seemed like lyrics to me. Patti was always just so good in front of an audience. She was so good at poetry readings. A lot of the poets didn't like her work that much; it seems she didn't fit the program at St. Mark's Church. She got invited to read with Gerard Malanga, who was a popular poet at St. Mark's. He was also Andy Warhol's right hand man at the time (that was) before he was overthrown by Paul Morrissey. So Gerard had Patti read first at St. Mark's. She just blew everybody away. It was her night. She was really great! I thought she would get invited back within a couple of years. It's a two year cycle no matter who you are, because there are all these other poets they have to fit in. Everybody wants to read at St. Mark's Church. FA: Could you tell us about St. Mark's itself?

JC: It's a very old church on Tenth Street and Second Avenue in the Bowery of New York City. Peter Stuyvesant, the first mayor of (what is now) New York, is buried in a crypt in the side wall of it. It has a graveyard on each side of the building with all these Revolutionary War heroes, and tombstones from the late sixteen hundreds on.

It was already a major place in the poetry scene when I came around. When I got there, Anne Waldman had just started to run the poetry program. On Monday nights there would be open readings in the parish hall where anybody could read for five minutes each. Then on Wednesday night the big shots came to read. They would either have that in the main church or, depending on the size of the crowd, in the parish room also. Then on other nights there are workshops going on in all these little rooms off to the side. The National

Endowment for the Arts was pretty active in the art scene in those days. So teaching workshops each week was a good way for poets to make some decent money. I was working there as a kind of assistant. I was running open mikes and open readings and stuff. I was about seventeen when I started.

Upstairs they have this small theatre. It's very nice and very well equipped. The main playwright there at the time was Sam Sheppard. He was only about twenty-two then. He had already made a name for himself. **THE CONNECTION** (by Jack Gilbert) had been put on there. It was a seminal junkie play of the times. St. Marks Church in the Bowery was the hub for the downtown art scene.

FA: You mentioned the availability of NEA grants. What about your own dealings with the NEA and the censors effects on two friends of yours, Robert Mapplethorpe and Keith Haring?

JC: Indirectly I've gotten NEA money, getting paid for teaching, and assisting at St. Marks, but I've never applied for an NEA grant. I got a grant from the California Art Council when I was living in California. It carried me through three years out there in Bolinas. I got it renewed every year, and I got about \$350.00 a month. I was on a drug program when I first went out there. In California I had to (either) teach a workshop in creative writing at a drug program or teach a workshop at San Quentin. I opted for the program. You have to do some sort of public service according to your talents. To give something back. But that was California under Jerry Brown's administration. It was user friendly to me.

It's funny you should mention Robert Mapplethorpe and Keith Haring. I just got this thing in the mail--it's right in front of me now--from the John Giorno AIDS Treatment Project. You know Giorno, he puts out these poetry records with Burroughs and Laurie Anderson, just about a everybody really (who has been) at one time in the New York scene. There's a funny picture of Patti and Robert . . . oh, that's from Fifth Avenue when they were living there. Not together, in different apartments.

Did Robert get an NEA grant for himself? I don't think so, he never needed it. I knew Robert when he was living with Patti

and me in the early seventies. He was doing ok even then. Patti was working and she was taking care of everybody. Nobody seemed to need very much money then. Patti was just great, covering our rents and food, always taking care of her friends. Then after that, Robert moved out when he found his boyfriend patron, who took care of Robert in a grandiose style.

Then he really made his reputation as a photographer. (The NEA only affected him) indirectly (through) that place in Washington DC and of course Cincinnati --places that get grants from the NEA and show works by Robert Mapplethorpe, Joel Peter-Witkin and Keith Haring. Although, with Keith, I can't imagine how his work could be offensive. It's like kiddie cartoons, on one level. I went to see the Anne Liebowitz show yesterday. She has this big show that's at the Photography Center in New York. She had this picture of Keith Haring--he painted himself like one of his figures, only he was nude. It was funny. It's really hard to try to figure what people will get upset about. The other day I heard about a Goya, one of those nude Maja paintings, that was taken down in Pittsburgh because someone complained that the painting was harassing them. My God, that's really scary!

FA: One last question: Now that you've joined the ranks of Spalding Gray and John O' Keefe in the spoken word and have a spoken word record and compact disc out on a Warner Brothers label, where can we get PRAYING MANTIS? Do people go to a record store: is it in a special section? Will book stores carry it? How will it be promoted?

JC: Well, to answer that last part. I'm doing public readings live and readings on the radio with interviews. I'm touring all over the country doing shows. Because of the Warner Books connection, it's supposed to be in bookstores also.

Especially ones with a sense of poetry and spoken word. I know in New York it's at St. Mark's and B. Dalton in the Village has a huge display. I'd like to think it's in City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, Cody's in Berkeley, and other appropriate places. Some of my audience is more rock and roll, some only from the poetry side of things. It's a strange polemic and sometimes the twain does not meet.

I know these days, right now, I feel much more at home in a bookstore than I do in a record store. It's much more pleasant.

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